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TREASURY FOR GLASER/LEBENSON  
EB/ESC/TFS FOR SALOOM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/27/2016  
TAGS: [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [EINV](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: FOUR SEASONS INAUGURATION SPEECH PROVIDES POSITIVE  
ENDORSEMENT OF ASAD REGIME

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche, reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) During the March 22 inauguration of the \$100 million Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus, primary investor Saudi Prince al-Walid bin Talal used the occasion to praise Syria as a "defender of Arabism and Islam," as well as the strength of the Syrian-Saudi bilateral relationship. Chairman of Western Union Mazen Tabbaa stated that al-Walid's speech placed Saudi Arabia's relationship with Syria on par with its relationship with the United States, and that al-Walid asserted that Syria should continue to defend Arab dignity in the face of undue international pressure. Contacts who attended the opening say that al-Walid, who addressed a select crowd of Syrian businessmen and investors, provided what they described as a ringing endorsement of Bashar al-Asad and the path down which he is leading the country.

¶2. (C) Syrian and regional press reported widely on the inauguration, with front-page coverage highlighting al-Walid's speech, which contacts say was a welcome tonic for the spirits of businessmen who have felt disheartened over Syrian economic prospects for the immediate future. Al-Walid's comments come in the context of an increased number of Gulf tourists to Syria in the past year, as well as high levels of Gulf foreign direct investment (reftel). Several Syrian business contacts interpreted al-Walid's comments as another sign that Syria is not economically isolated. Haythem Joud, a prominent Sunni businessman, stated that al-Walid glowingly endorsed the Syrian economy, characterizing it as stable and a promising locale in which to do business. Joud pointed to al-Walid's willingness to expand his investments to Aleppo and Lattakia as evidence that al-Walid supports Syria's economic path. Ammar Sabbagh, who has partnered with a Jordanian company to construct a four-star hotel complex in Aleppo, told us that al-Walid's challenge to businessmen to commit to Syria and its future has encouraged him to begin exploring similar investment possibilities in Damascus.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: Whether intentional or not, al-Walid's optimistic commentary during the Four Seasons inaugural events has resulted in prominent members of the Syrian business community rallying around the Asad regime and Syria's economic future at a time when many were beginning to question their long-held belief that Asad was Syria's best choice for leadership. How long this resurgence of support lasts in the absence of real economic reform is anybody's

guess, although we suspect the harsh realities of the  
marketplace quickly willl trump al-Walid's upbeat assessment.  
SECHE